

# Dragonshards

## Intrigue and Betrayal

*By Keith Baker*



While Eberron is a world of action and pulp adventure, it was also inspired by the dark and uncertain tone of film noir. It is a world where little is truly as it seems, where stories don't always end well, and where allies can become enemies in the blink of an eye. While this sounds exciting, it can be difficult to do well. Here are a few points to consider if you want to add more mystery and betrayal to your campaign.

### Simple Betrayal vs. the Big, Bad Picture

Betrayal is one of the classic noir themes, probably because it can be used in so many ways: the employer who lies about a job; the supposed friend who leads the party into a trap; the merchant who passes false goods. All of these can be fine plot devices when used in moderation. However, if every patron cheats the party, every guide leads them astray, and every piece of treasure turns out to be cursed, you won't create a sense of intrigue. If betrayal is so common that it becomes expected, then there's no suspense, only a frustrating sense of paranoia. If you never trust anyone, you never really feel the dramatic impact of betrayal.

### Consider the following:

The party is approached by a gnome, Janius Jen Solan. Her platinum rings suggest that she is a member of the Aurum. She offers the party a considerable sum of cash to recover a Dhakaani relic from a ruin beneath Fairhaven. The porter the party hires turns out to be working for the Order of the Emerald Claw; at a key moment, he springs an undead ambush on the adventurers and tries to steal the relic. At the end, Janius appears with a small army of Deneith mercenaries -- too many for the party to fight. Instead of paying the heroes, she takes the artifact, leaving them with their lives but little else.

On a certain level, this satisfies many noir stereotypes. But how is it fun for the party? What will they do the next time a gnome offers them a job? How many hirelings can prove treacherous before the players resolve never to use NPC servants again?

### As an alternative, consider this:

The party is approached by a gnome, Janius Jen Solan. While she introduces herself as a scholar from Morggrave University, her copper rings suggest that she might be a member of the Aurum; if asked about this, she acknowledges that she is a member of the lowest concord. She offers the party a moderate sum to acquire a Dhakaani relic from beneath Fairhaven, along with the promise that there will be other treasures to recover. At a key moment during the mission, the porter hired by the party reveals that he is being blackmailed by the Order of the Emerald Claw; those villains demanded that he lead the heroes into a trap. If he does not, his family will be killed. With his help, the party can plan a counter-ambush and turn the tables on the would-be assassins. The party then recovers the relic plus additional treasure, and there is much rejoicing. All seems well.

Of course, things are not what they seem. In future sessions, the party is attacked repeatedly by well-organized groups of angry Dhakaani goblinoids. It turns out that in recovering the relic and looting the other treasure in the

ruin, they desecrated one of the holiest Dhakaani tombs. Now the goblinoids will not rest until every item has been recovered. Janius was entirely ignorant of this. She is in danger from another direction, as well; she was given this task by a higher-ranking member of the Aurum, to whom she gave the relic in an attempt to rise within the ranks. She will help the party as best she can, but she has little influence, and the dwarf who now holds the relic has great influence. Can the party get the relic away from him? What sort of enemies will they make in the process?

More surprises wait to be revealed. The "porter" was actually a member of House Thuranni. The Order of the Emerald Claw never intended to ambush the party; instead, the porter tricked the party into attacking a group of Emerald Claw operatives on a top-secret mission. Now the Emerald Claw thinks that these characters are interfering with one of their major schemes, and it will take steps to end the interference. This unwittingly reveals the plot to the party, giving them a chance to stop it. But who hired the Thuranni operative? Was this an attempt to frame the player characters, or were they just convenient tools for an attack against the Claw?

Simple betrayal has obvious, short-term consequences for what are typically clear-cut heroes and villains. By contrast, a subtle scheme may take weeks or months to come to light, and there may not be an obvious bad guy. In the second example, Janius didn't realize what she was doing, and even the porter was simply doing a job; his unknown employee is the true villain.

The more subtle betrayal is less likely to cause a knee-jerk reaction in the future. Yes, the gnome nearly got them killed, but she didn't grasp the significance of the site. Besides, the PCs were the ones who looted the rest of the tomb. The next time a gnome offers them a job they may ask more questions, but hopefully they won't say "All gnomes are evil!" and refuse to play.

The key axiom to bear in mind is that *no one likes to lose*. If betrayal takes the party's victory away from them -- as when the villain steals their treasure and they get nothing -- the players will be frustrated and angry. If the betrayal simply sets a new storyline in motion, the fun of the past story is not swept away and the players can enjoy their new quest for survival ... and revenge.

## **Good Today, Bad Tomorrow**

One of the themes of Eberron is that good and evil are not clear cut. An evil vampire can serve the greater good while a noble cleric might, with the best of intentions, set a terrible inquisition in motion. Learning a character's alignment gives you a clue as to how far you can trust her, but it's only one piece of a puzzle.

Where this is true of individuals, it is equally true of organizations. The Aurum is untrustworthy, but not every member is evil. It can take actions that will have positive results (though there's probably profit for the patron in there somewhere). An organization is a collection of individuals, each with his or her own goals. The trick is to develop contacts the party can trust so, when they get a job from a new member of the Aurum, they can check with their old ally to see where they stand -- assuming, of course, that their old ally hasn't turned against them or been replaced by the Lords of Dust. Nothing is ever certain!

## **Biting the Hand**

While a party can be betrayed by its patrons or allies, it could also be employed by a patron who is plotting against his own organization. Then the PCs aren't the ones being betrayed. Instead they are the instruments of betrayal. Janius Jen Solan has a scheme to get to the Platinum Concord, but it involves killing a number of powerful members of the Aurum. If the party assists Janius, the characters stand to gain a considerable amount

of local influence. If they fail, they will place themselves in grave danger.

Then there is the question of Janius's motives. Is her desire for power fueled by simple greed, or is she actually a disguised member of the Lords of Dust, possessed by a spirit from the Dreaming Dark, or a spy for the Royal Eyes of Aundair?

Again, the key is not to steal the party's victory! Even if Janius lied about her motives, the party will still benefit from its association. The characters will get treasure, and experience, and the satisfaction of beating the unpleasant members of the Aurum. They'll gain a powerful patron in Janius. What happens when they discover that Janius is using them to strike against the King's Citadel? Will they get deeper into the intrigue, or will they betray their former patron?

This level of intrigue isn't for everyone. You may prefer to stick with straightforward dungeon crawls and never worry about the consequences of these tasks. As the Five nations search for ancient weapons and the secret of the Mournland, however, even dungeon crawls can be tied to political intrigue. Who knows? That magic ring you find in the goblin's cave could turn out to be the key to victory in the next war.

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## About the Author

Keith Baker has been an avid fan of **Dungeons & Dragons** since grade school. His life took a dramatic turn in 2002 when he submitted the world of Eberron to the WotC Fantasy Setting Search. In addition to developing the **Eberron** Campaign Setting and *Shadows of the Last War*, he has worked for Atlas Games, Goodman Games, and Green Ronin.

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